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ABSTRACT

This booklet on spelling instruction, developed in response to requests to incoporated spelling into an integrated language arts program, contains information related to the current thinking on effective and appropriate spelling instruction. Following an overview, the booklet discusses the developmental stages of the learner, effective spelling strategies, ideas for implementing spelling into the curriculum, and thoughts on communicating with parents. (Twenty-three references are attached.) (PRA)

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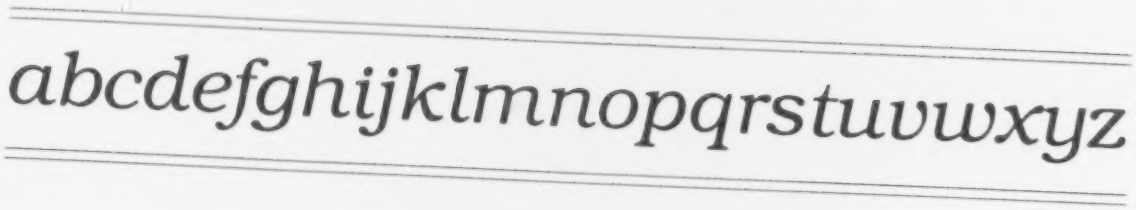

Spelling Instruction:
A Proper Perspective

Texas Education Agency
Austin, Texas

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A Proper Perspective

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Foreword

Spelling Instruction: A Proper Perspective was developed in response to numerous requests for assistance in incorporating spelling into an integrated language arts program. Teachers will find information in the publication related to the current thinking on how best to teach spelling, effective strategies, developmental stages of the learner in spelling, and ways to communicate with parents about effective spelling strategies. Knowledge of this information is important for developing appropriate and effective spelling instruction.

Since overconcern with spelling can be a hindrance to writing fluency, this document attempts to help teachers and school districts integrate spelling instruction into developmentally appropriate language arts programs. We hope that schools will make a copy of this document available to every teacher.

Thomas E. Anderson, Jr.
Interim Commissioner of Education

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Overview

In English, achieving absolute correctness in spelling is not easy. For linguistic and historical reasons, the written language does not correspond consistently with the spoken language, and the result is a confusing mixture of generalizations with frequent exceptions. Nevertheless, teachers have traditionally felt that mastery of spelling rules should help and have conscientiously drilled students in rules and their application. However, there are over 300 rules, and, as surprising as it may seem, even a thorough knowledge of all the rules will help spell only 50% of English words correctly (Hanna, 1964). Many of us frequently have attempted to cover the other 50% by having students memorize the spelling lists of "sight" words. As much as 30 minutes of class time daily has been devoted to this traditional approach with questionable results. A 1980 study, for instance, showed that students in Texas spent over 75 minutes a week to learn 2.9 words but retained only one word per week (Stetson, 1980).

On the national level, the instruction we have provided apparently has not taught students to spell correctly. "In comparing the third national assessment in writing with previous assessments, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1980-81) reported that nine-year-olds were poorer in spelling and thirteen- and seventeen-year-olds were significantly poorer in their spelling. Hence, the extravagant time allotment has not contributed to skill in spelling" (Hillerich, 1985).

A considerable body of research on the teaching of spelling has existed for the better part of this century and is in more agreement than in any other area of the curriculum. Unfortunately, however, the research has been virtually ignored by most commercial spelling programs, which tend to take the form of workbooks or exercises that focus on spelling alone. For example, in Texas, 85% of the classrooms use a spelling text program, even though the research does not support this approach (Stetson, 1980).

To date, spelling research has revealed the following:

- Spelling should be taught; it is not learned incidentally.
- The learning of rules is only marginally helpful.
- Language and spelling are both developmental processes.
- There is a logic to the spelling patterns of early spellers, and their errors change over time as they experiment with language.
- To master English spelling, students need to perceive patterns that exist in words.

- Students' invented spellings indicate the tactics they use to determine the spelling of words.
- The pretest-study-test method is superior to the study-test method.
- Correction of the student's own pretest, under the direction of the teacher, is the single most important factor in learning to spell.
- Sixty to seventy-five minutes of spelling instruction per week is adequate, and a larger amount of time will not automatically raise spelling achievement.
- Students should be taught to follow a particular sequence of steps in learning how to spell.
- Words of highest frequency in student and adult writing should be the words studied.
- Initial presentation of words should be in list form.
- The use of students' spelling errors for developing spelling lists leads to new understandings of the writing system.
- Learning the origin of a word and its relationship to others derived from the same root will often lead to correct spelling.
- Frequent opportunities to use spelling words in writing contribute greatly to the maintenance of spelling ability.

Research does not support the following practices for improving spelling:*

- writing spelling words in the air
- studying the "hard spots" in words. Furthermore, it can even be harmful to spelling progress.
- writing words several times to ensure retention
- studying spelling words in the context of a sentence or a paragraph to ensure retention
- presenting words broken into syllables. Furthermore, it can even be detrimental to spelling progress.
- relying heavily on phonics rules
- assigning words for spelling before a student is able to read them

Spelling makes sense only in the context of the written word, where it serves the needs of both writers and readers. Viewed in its proper perspective, spelling is a tool to assist writers in expressing themselves effectively. In the classroom, the teacher's responsibility is not only to provide sound instruction in spelling but to help students develop in themselves a spelling awareness that is the result of a desire to express themselves effectively in writing.

*Research references can be found in the works by Allred, Fitzsimmons and Loomer, and Henderson listed in the bibliography, page 12.

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Developmental Stages Of the Learner in Spelling*

All students pass through stages of spelling invention and errors as they learn to read and write. In early grades, students move rapidly through these stages while older students assimilate the new vocabulary of adulthood. It is important that all teachers understand that these stages are natural and that students must be allowed to experiment and take risks with language to improve their spelling. By marking errors in first drafts, teachers frequently discourage students from trying new words in their writing. Avoiding red marks on student writing is especially important in the primary grades as students attempt to apply generalizations and experiment with words to develop fluency. Avoiding red marks in the older students' papers encourages attempts to use rich vocabulary (McPherson, 1984).

There is a logic to the error patterns of early spellers, and these error patterns change over time as students experience language. Such patterns occur in all languages, in all dialects, and for all levels of intelligence and economic status (Stever, 1980). Teachers must observe the types of spelling errors each student is making to determine the student's developmental progress (Hodges, 1981). Counting the number of words spelled correctly on a test is not sufficient information for diagnosis. There are no clear lines between developmental stages as students move through these patterns at varying rates. The following patterns show a developmental progression.

Prereading and Writing

As students write at this stage, their attempts at spelling are not understandable or readable. These students scribble, draw, imitate writing, and learn letters. Implications for teaching spelling at this stage of development are that the teacher should

- provide a print-rich environment
- use language experience stories
- read aloud often
- provide frequent writing opportunities and ample drawing materials

*This information is derived from studies by Henderson (1980), Zutell (1978), Gentry (1987) and Beers (1980).

Beginning Reading and Writing

During this stage of development, students begin to show an awareness of words and use sound/letter representations when writing. Implications for teaching spelling at this stage are the following:

- provide daily opportunities to write and draw
- help develop a spelling awareness
- provide a print-rich environment
- use language experience stories
- present word families, patterns, phonics, and word structure
- allow daily exploration with books

Early Reading and Writing

As students experiment more with language and writing and attempt generalizations, they begin to spell more sight words correctly, use short vowels correctly, spell some blends correctly, and reverse some letters. Implications for teaching spelling to students at this stage are the following:

- have students write daily for a variety of purposes
- connect reading and writing through language experience
- encourage invented spellings
- begin some formal spelling instruction of words that students can read
- introduce editing and proofreading strategies
- model writing often
- allow daily exploration of books

Maturing Reading and Writing

Students who are developing into fluent readers and writers begin to use multisyllable words more frequently, spell a large collection of words correctly, and recognize misspellings more often if they are reading and writing daily. Implications for teaching spelling to the students at this level are the following:

- continue formal spelling instruction
- teach writing as a process
- model writing often
- allow invented spellings in rough drafts
- maintain a daily writing program
- provide writing for a variety of purposes and audiences

- teach a variety of editing and proofreading skills
- teach structural analysis
- provide a variety of word activities
- encourage reading for a variety of purposes including personal choice

Fluent Reading and Writing

The fluent reader and writer who has moved from concrete to more abstract thinking uses more multimeaning words and homophones. The fluent writer shows a greater awareness of roots, prefixes, and suffixes and thus has a more enriched vocabulary. Implications for teaching these students are the following:

- provide daily writing for a variety of purposes and audiences
- encourage the use of self-editing, peer editing, and proofreading skills
- provide formal spelling instruction as needed
- reteach on an individual basis as needed
- teach structural analysis
- provide a variety of word activities including word histories and origins
- encourage reading for a variety of purposes, including personal choice

Teachers should understand students' developmental patterns and their implications for instruction. Readiness for beginning formal spelling instruction is dependent upon students grasping the concept of the written word and having the ability to read a word list. Teachers need to develop an awareness of these levels to understand when each student is ready for formal spelling instruction. Some students are ready in early first grade, others in late first grade, and still others are not ready until the beginning of second grade. Formal spelling instruction should continue as long as students need to relearn strategies for becoming independent spellers. While formal spelling instruction should be included in daily reading and writing activities, this instruction should target words needed by the student. Spelling lists should not be composed of words that students will not be likely to use in writing.

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Effective Spelling Strategies

Effective spelling instruction is necessarily a part of reading and writing instruction. Because spelling problems are complex, teachers need help in diagnosing those problems, and students must develop a range of strategies for solving them (Bean and Bouffler, 1987). Learning to spell involves memory, but experimentation with the various principles of English spelling is also necessary. The following strategies can be useful to the teacher for diagnosing, developing spelling lists, and testing effectively. Strategies are also given for helping students to develop spelling awareness within their own writing and to develop better study strategies.

Strategies for List Development and Diagnosis

The teacher should

- look for the types of errors that students make in their own writing. Use the information gained from student errors (both those found in self-editing and those overlooked) to help determine the different types of spelling problems that should be included in students' spelling lists (Anderson, 1985).
- have students keep in their folders an individualized, alphabetized list of frequently misspelled words. Students can use their lists independently when editing, and the teacher can use them in developing class spelling lists.
- derive spelling lists from students' own writing and from high-frequency word lists as well as some patterned and nonpatterned words. Content words that are necessary for writing in a particular subject area can also be added. Words added solely for length and difficulty are inappropriate.
- keep spelling lists a reasonable length. A list of five to ten learned words is better than a list of twenty words that are memorized only for the Friday test and then forgotten.
- present words in list form for quicker retention. Since a fluent reader does not fixate on individual words, and since spelling requires concentration on isolated words, merely teaching spelling within a context is not enough.
- include in spelling lists only words that students can read
- for advanced spellers, use other forms of the original list of words, e.g., "forget-unforgettable," instead of just longer lists or words not often used

- group some words by patterns for beginners and some by meaning for more mature spellers. Make sure there is a mixture of patterned words, repeating each pattern periodically to help students recognize the generalizations.

Testing Strategies

The teacher should

- use the pretest-study-test method. There is no value in the study-test method.
- have students correct their own pretests with teacher direction, since this is the single most effective strategy contributing to spelling retention. Teacher direction may consist of the following: the student touches each letter of the word as the teacher spells the word aloud and writes it on the board. Then the student circles the word if it is spelled correctly or rewrites the word if it is spelled incorrectly. Students then need to be provided time for studying the words that they have missed. Students with excessive spelling problems in their written work will need individualized help. The self-corrected test helps students see which words to study and helps parents to see where their child needs help.

Formal Spelling Instruction

Formal spelling instruction can be scheduled in various ways.

- Two suggested spelling plans for the week might be the following:
  1. MONDAY—Pretest/self-correction with teacher direction: 20 to 30 minutes
     TUESDAY—Peer group of two students; one student calls words while the other writes (spelling is not an oral skill): 10 minutes
     WEDNESDAY—Peer group; reversing the Tuesday activity, the writer becomes the caller: 10 minutes
     THURSDAY—A spelling game or word activity: 10 minutes
     FRIDAY—Final test: 10 to 15 minutes
  2. MONDAY—Pretest/self-correction with teacher direction: 20 to 30 minutes
     TUESDAY—Peer groups give written drills to each other on missed words as needed: 20 minutes
     WEDNESDAY or THURSDAY—Spelling games or word activities: 10 to 15 minutes
     THURSDAY or FRIDAY—Final test: 10 to 15 minutes

Sixty to 75 minutes on formal spelling instruction per week is sufficient since research shows that additional time is ineffective for improving spelling. The week should include daily writing opportunities as well as informal spelling instruction.

Informal Spelling Instruction

The teacher should

- allow students significant daily blocks of time to enjoy reading
- allow daily opportunities to write for various purposes and audiences

- encourage independence in spelling awareness. Have students consult their personal spelling lists, their peers, the dictionary, and the thesaurus before seeking the teacher's help. Encourage students to use invented spellings in first drafts. Have them circle words they are not sure of and continue their writings so fluency is not interrupted.
- allow students to take risks with words. Avoid marking spelling errors in first drafts.

  allow time in the schedule for putting a piece away between drafting and editing
- teach strategies for proofreading, e.g., read the paper backwards and circle each word that is thought to be misspelled, then let a peer proofread and mark spelling errors. Some students use a ruler to proofread line by line. Others might prefer using a finger as a word-by-word pointer. Having students read their writing aloud can sometimes help them to find mistakes. These strategies help students focus on words instead of content.
- teach students a systematic approach for spelling each word that includes auditory, visual, and kinesthetic involvement with words. For example, tell the student:
  - Look at the word.
  - Say and touch each letter.
  - Close your eyes, visualize the word, then silently spell it.
  - Write the word.
- allow more publishing opportunities as students mature. Publishing for a variety of audiences enables students to see correct spelling and mechanics as a courtesy to the reader. Thus, spelling becomes important to the writer.

Implications

The teacher should

- allow invented spellings as students experiment with language at all grade levels
- teach spelling as an integral part of the writing process
- integrate reading, writing, and spelling instruction
- allow many reading and writing opportunities of various kinds
- teach and encourage word study
- teach spelling formally as well as informally

Effective spelling instruction must be taught at all grade levels. Ineffective strategies not only waste time but can be detrimental to students learning to spell. When students write, they have two sources of information about correct spelling: "They may call on memorized words, and they may make their best approximations on the basis of what they know about how English words are spelled. . . . If an absolute standard of correctness is demanded, children will be hopelessly limited in their written productions" (Henderson, 1990).

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Integrating Spelling Into the Curriculum

The aim of an effective English language arts curriculum is to develop competent users of language who can read, write, listen, and speak effectively. All areas of language arts share common attributes, so one facet cannot be isolated without affecting the others. Students can make better connections when all communication skills are taught in an integrated fashion.

Spelling serves the needs of both readers and writers. It enables writers to record meaning and readers to construct meaning. As students read they learn to spell some words and recognize certain sounds, and as they write they apply that knowledge. Also, oral language contributes to spelling awareness. As they listen and learn to say words, students learn to spell; thus, mispronunciations can cause many spelling problems. In summary, "A genuine communication program acknowledges the interrelatedness of all of the language arts as well as the need for specific teaching attention to specific skills" (Barbe, 1982).

Commercial spelling materials, however, are usually patterned with little acknowledgement of this interrelatedness. A typical program has teachers introduce a list of words Monday, give a pretest on Tuesday, assign sentences on Wednesday, and engage in phonics or dictionary drills on Thursday. Friday is the final test. Many other drill and skill exercises are included and typically are assigned as homework or independent seat work. The commercial word lists might contain patterned words, words from other curriculum areas, words from lists of sight words, or frequency-of-use lists, but the lists are not derived directly from the needs of the students in that particular classroom.

On the other hand, in an integrated curriculum, where writing is as important as reading, a student's need to spell correctly develops from a need to have writing understood by others. The following activities enable spelling to be incorporated into a purposeful context. The teacher should

- provide frequent opportunities to write, making connections between reading and writing
- encourage students in their first drafts to focus on content and on using a rich variety of words without worrying about spelling correctness. Primary students need to spend time developing fluency in writing rather than being concerned with correctness.
- because spelling and mechanical correctness become important to students when writing is to be published, provide a large variety of publishing opportunities, even though not all writing has to be published. Displaying primary students' writing with invented spellings uncorrected, however, is acceptable and even encouraged.

- after teaching specific editing techniques (see examples of Effective Spelling Strategies, pages 6-8), allow students to edit for themselves, for peers, and in small groups. As students become more responsible for their own writing, the teacher functions more as final editor. Students who edit their own work and the work of others develop proficiency in recognizing when words are misspelled.
- provide brief formal spelling instruction on those words that students need for clarity in their own writing. (See Formal Spelling Instruction, page 7.)

In an effective integrated language arts program, students should be engaged in a variety of activities that expose them to words and that foster an interest in words. The following activities from Bean and Bouffler (1987) are examples of this type of word-focused instruction. The teacher should

- have beginning readers and remedial readers write predictable books that focus on word patterns. Even older students can publish patterned books for younger students.
- have students write texts for wordless picture books, brainstorming words as a prewriting activity
- use a familiar story or topic and write several sentence beginnings that prompt further thought on a specific topic, e.g.,

  Texas has more land than . . .
  and produces more . . .
  because of . . .

  Then the whole group, small group, or an individual can complete this cloze activity.
- focus on affixes or particular types of words by using books that bring attention to words. For example, after students have read Roald Dahl's The BFG (1989), which uses made-up words such as murderful, they can list and discuss other words ending in ful. A poem appropriate for this activity is Turnable, Twistable Man by Shel Silverstein (1981).
- dictate meaningful passages such as jokes, poems, or sayings. Although dictation for the sake of dictation has no purpose, this activity can shift the focus to handwriting and spelling. Students can rewrite the passages to take home, display, or publish in a book.

These are but a few activities that focus on words both formally and informally. Clearly, spelling has no other purpose but to help students communicate in their reading and writing with accuracy and precision and thus become competent users of the English language. An integrated language arts program encourages students to use standard spelling meaningfully as they read and write for a variety of purposes.

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Communicating with Parents

At the beginning of and throughout the year, teachers should inform parents about the school's reading, writing, and spelling programs, emphasizing the following points:

- The primary emphasis in writing will be on thought and content rather than on spelling and mechanics.
- Students will be given opportunities to write every day, but not every paper will be corrected analytically by the teacher.
- Students will be allowed and encouraged to use invented spellings to promote broader vocabularies and the application of generalizations.
- Students will be taught strategies for becoming independent spellers.

Teachers should share the research findings in this document with parents and encourage them to be supportive of their children's efforts in writing, reading, and spelling. The aim for teachers and parents alike is to focus on content, not errors, and to make positive comments on what the student has accomplished. "The goal should be to nurture children who are readers, writers, thinkers, children who are not afraid to spell. Children will themselves coordinate reading, spelling, writing, and thinking when they use these processes to their advantage," states K. Jongsma, a nationally recognized reading educator.

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